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The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Richards, Leonard L. *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.00 hardcover ISBN 9780307265203

California's Sectional Conflict

A few years ago, Leonard L. Richards wrote *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (2000), a very good addition to the growing literature re-examining the influence slave owners had in United States politics before the Civil War. This literature renewed attention to such issues as the three-fifths clause which gave the South both extra seats in Congress and votes in the Electoral College by counting some enslaved southerners towards the South's representation in those bodies. Works by Garry Wills (*Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power*, 2003) and Don E. Fehrenbacher (*The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, 2001) have been a part of this trend.

Richards's new book can be seen as a contribution to this genre as well. A native Californian, and descendant of hard-rock miners, it was only as a professional historian that Richards learned of proslavery influence on California. *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* is less about either the Gold Rush or the coming of the Civil War than it is about the role that slavery played in California's history during that period and how California figured into the increasing sectionalization of the country.

The narrative begins with the dueling death of California senator David Broderick. Broderick, a free-soil Democrat, was shot and killed, in what some alleged was really a political assassination, by David S. Terry, a proslavery Democrat. Broderick's 1859 death is usually a footnote in most accounts of the sectional conflict and is overshadowed by events such as the Harpers Ferry raid or the coming presidential election. Richards merely hints in his prologue at the larger significance of the duel. He will return to it after two hundred pages spent elaborating California's history from the Gold Rush to that fateful encounter.

Richards's story includes discovery of the gold, overland migration, the Compromise of 1850, and much of internal territorial and early state politics. Readers will learn about filibustering, much of it based in California, against Mexico and other Latin American countries. Richards details the rise of sectionalism at the national level from the Kansas-Nebraska Act to the Civil War. California was too far away for either the Union or Confederate governments to make much use of the state's manpower, but volunteers did find their way east to fight on both sides and California gold helped finance the Union cause.

The cast of characters Richard arrays in this saga can sometimes grow bewilderingly large. Numerous people play a small role and then disappear from the account. Nonetheless, the stories are often fascinating and rarely told. Everyone knows that gold was discovered at Johann Sutter's fort. Many people know that workers building a sawmill first found the gold. But I suspect far fewer know about the role of Jennie Wimmer, the bad-tempered cook for the crew, who hailed from Georgia and had lived through a gold rush there. It was she who knew how to test the gold-she boiled it with her soap and when it came out bright and uncorroded, it was proven to be gold and not fool's gold.

Despite stories such as this, Richards's tale, especially once it moves past the Gold Rush, becomes increasingly about white male politicians. Women such as Jennie Wimmer and Mary Gwin, the accomplished hostess wife of California Senator William Gwin, appear in the story. So do Californio politicians such as Andrés Pico who was interested in splitting California into two states. And Richards notes in due course Native Americans, Chinese, and African Americans in California. But this is not the rich multiculturally oriented work of Susan Lee Johnson (*Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*, 2000). There is much more about Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas in this book about California than there is about Andrés Pico. That focus on the traditional North-South sectional split as played out in California does lead Richards to neglect some aspects of California's history. There is no discussion of how the Mexican population, and Anglo attitudes toward it, shaped race relations in California, the nature of the California constitution, or California's sectional stance. Leonard Pitt (*The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890*, 1966) long ago described how Anglos stripped the Mexican Californians of land and power, but none of this appears in Richards's account. Richards acknowledges that Mexican Californians

such as Pico wanted to split the state but he discusses this measure largely as an attempt to create another slave state out of one of the halves. Why would Pico and other Californios be interested in such a prospect? Richards doesn't say.

The larger conundrum of Richards's book, however, concerns the Republican Party. Richards spends much attention delineating the development of the parties—Democrats, Republicans, and Know Nothings—in California. He argues that the Republicans struggled to gain a following. He is far more interested in the split within the Democracy—a split that led to Broderick's murder by the fellow Democrat Terry. Broderick led the pro-immigrant, free-soil wing of the Democracy while fellow senator William Gwin was a Chiv (short for Chivalry), a Southerner and slaveowner who represented the militantly proslavery wing of the party. Terry was also a Chiv. Richards is very good at laying out the dominance of the Chivs in much of California politics in the 1850s. But California's electoral votes went to Lincoln in 1860. Richards never quite explains how that happened. He concentrates so much on showing how intersectional divisions within the Democrats led to Broderick's death, and detailing the proslavery proclivities of leading California politicians, that what seems to be a growing Republican presence in the state becomes neglected. It is also never clear, beyond the presence of some forceful southern immigrants who played a leading role in California politics, why the state tilted so heavily toward the South.

The book is easy to read and aimed at a popular audience with vivid word pictures of the many characters. Specialists will find much familiar material but viewed from a different angle. I recommend this book to anyone interested in California history and in an unusual perspective on the coming of the Civil War.

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